

Message Text

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DRAFTED BY HA/ORM:SCLOWMAN:CAR
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TO USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SREF

SUBJECT: INDOCHINESE BOAT REFUGEE TRENDS -- MALAYSIA

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 8858

1. REFTEL REPORTS INCREASED LOCALIZED GOM RESISTANCE TO REFUGEE LANDINGS IN MALAYSIA AS THE INDOCHINESE CAMP POPULATION APPROACHES 15,000. EMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR ALSO REPORTS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT CONDITIONS ON ULAU BEDONG ISLAND, RECENTLY OPENED AS A NEW REFUGEE CENTER. EMBASSY SUGGESTS GOM IS ENDEAVORING TO DIMINISH COUNTRY'S POPULARITY AS A PLACE OF TEMPORARY ASYLUM AND THAT IN CAMP CONDITIONS MAY WORSEN AS A RESULT. SOME BOATS MAY SINK DURING ONCOMING MONSOON AS THEY SEEK ASYLUM ALONG THE COAST OF MALAYSIA. US MISSION WILL REMEMBER SIMILAR EVENTS PRIOR TO JANUARY 1978 PAROLE RESULTED IN THE LOSS OF AT LEAST NINE LIVES. EMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR BELIEVES THAT A LARGE VOLUME OF BOAT REFUGEES WILL CONTINUE TO FIND
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ASYLUM SOMEWHERE IN MALAYSIA FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE BUT THAT THE GROWING CASELOAD WOULD LEAD GOM TO TAKE PROGRESSIVELY DRASTIC MEASURES TO CURB NEW ARRIVALS.

2. WHEN ORM DIRECTOR LOWMAN WAS IN GENEVA HE EXPRESSED TO THE HIGH COMMISSIONER THE DEPARTMENT'S CONCERN ABOUT

THIS POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT AND OUR BELIEF THAT WE WOULD BE FACING AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS SITUATION IN THE FALL AND WINTER OF THIS YEAR. AT THAT TIME, UNHCR OFFICIALS TOOK THE INITIATIVE IN SUGGESTING THE POSSIBILITY OF THE PHILIPPINES AS A POSSIBLE LOCATION FOR A TEMPORARY HOLDING CENTER WHICH WOULD ACCOMMODATE REFUGEES FROM MALAYSIA AWAITING EVENTUAL RESETTLEMENT ELSEWHERE. WE WERE SURPRISED THEREFORE TO RECEIVE REPORTS FROM BANGKOK THAT UNHCR OFFICIALS HOMANN-HERIMBERG AND DARYL HAN WHO VISITED MALAYSIA IN JULY BELIEVED THAT THE SITUATION WAS NOT SUFFICIENTLY CRITICAL TO JUSTIFY DISCUSSIONS WITH THE GOP ABOUT A POSSIBLE PHILIPPINE HOLDING CENTER. DEPARTMENT IS HOPEFUL THAT HOMANN-HERIMBERG'S OPTIMISM IS JUSTIFIED BUT NOTES THAT TRANSIT CENTER ARRANGEMENTS CANNOT BE DEVELOPED OVERNIGHT AND WONDERS IF UNHCR WOULD CONTINUE TO FEEL THAT IT IS ADEQUATELY PLANNING TO MEET ITS RESPONSIBILITIES IN LIGHT OF THE INFORMATION REPORTED REFTEL.

4. REQUEST US MISSION DISCUSS REFTEL WITH SENIOR UNHCR STAFF AND REPORT THEIR REACTIONS. WE BELIEVE IT SHOULD BE USEFUL TO EMPHASIZE THAT PROBLEM OF MAINTAINING ACCESS TO FIRST ASYLUM IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES IS ULTIMATELY THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNHCR. ONE VERY POSITIVE STEP IN ANTICIPATION OF MEETING THIS RESPONSIBILITY WOULD BE ACTIVE PURSUIT BY THE UNHCR OF ALTERNATIVE LOCATIONS FOR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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